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# Impartial Validity











# Impartial Validity

by Salah El Din Ahmed





**R.I.T**

**Impartial Validity**

by

**Salah El Din Ahmed**

Under the supervision of:

Committee Chair, Angela Kelly, Associate Professor

Committee Member, Jessica Lieberman, Assistant Professor

Committee Member, Oscar Palacio, Assistant Professor

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirement for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts  
in Imaging Arts

School of Photographic Arts and Sciences  
College of Imaging Arts and Sciences

Rochester Institute of Technology  
Rochester, NY  
March 17, 2013





**Committee Approval:**

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Committee Chair, Angela Kelly, Associate Professor	Date
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Committee Member, Jessica Lieberman, Assistant Professor	Date
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Committee Member, Oscar Palacio, Assistant Professor	Date
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## **Abstract**

Impartial Validity probes the relationship between self-representation and self-validation. This probing arises from an unsatisfied attempt to validate my own trauma associated with combat and selfhood.

I find myself drawn to photograph banal objects that seem to reflect me, using representation to authenticate the experience of trauma. I feel a connection with these objects before I photograph them. Yet, once I have rendered them as images, I discover that the tenuous connections between the objects and myself were wholly created by the potential of the camera in my original encounter. These connections have little or no reality outside of the photographic realm—they are structured by and through my sense of what they will be when imaged.

Thus, these representations provide little or no validation to the world or to me. Embracing the “machine,” the camera as a tool of healing and self-realization, I failed to convey how I felt or feel in relation to this trauma.

Impartial Validity deploys the camera as an automatic rifle; I shoot everything I see arbitrarily and indiscriminately, using direct flash at point blank-range. This approach functions as an acknowledgment of the absurdity of my initial attempt to represent myself truthfully. This process utilizes disorientation and blur to speak to the idea of lack; the process renders visual my belief in the limitations of photography as a tool of literal representation.

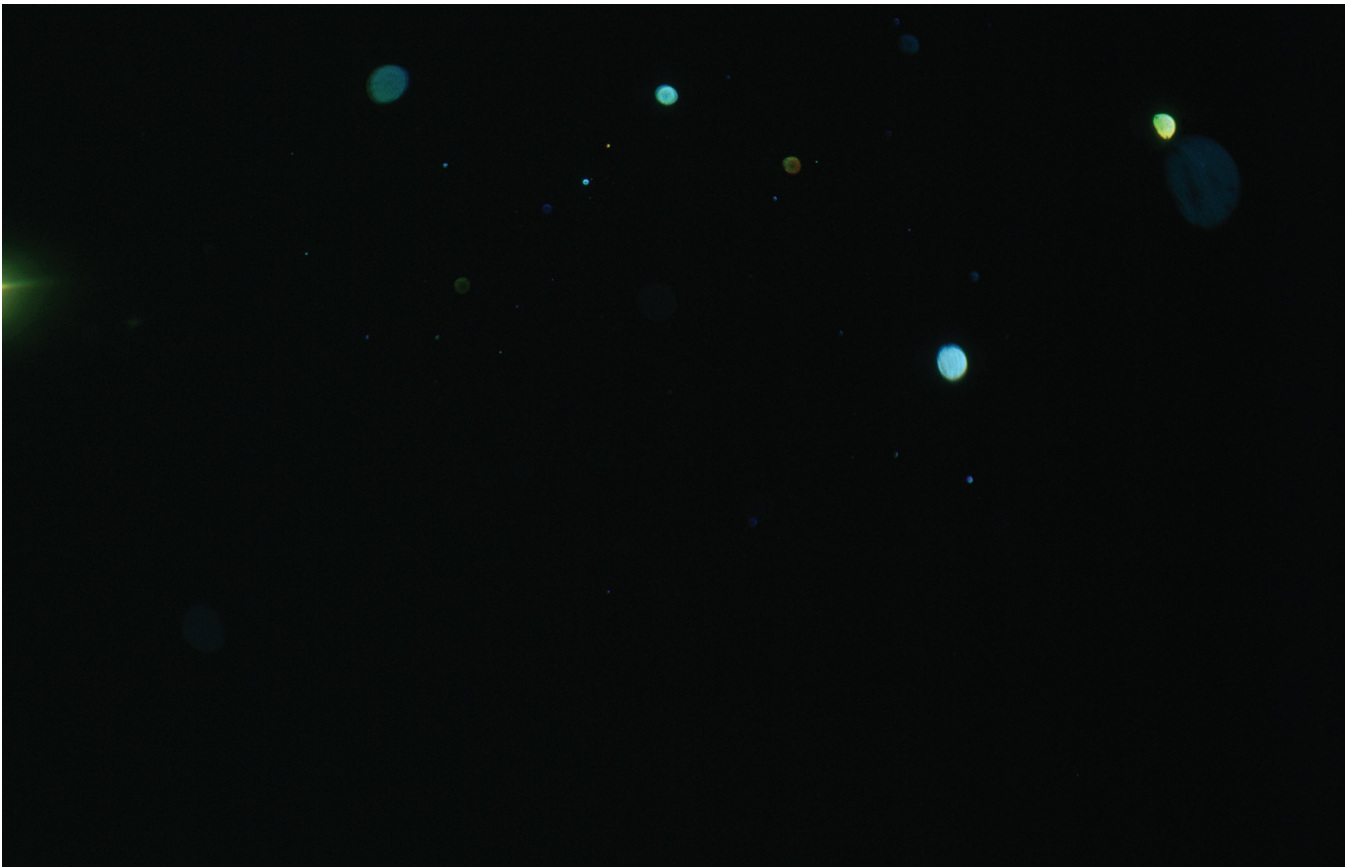
Further, this idea of lack positions the images in a state of amnesia, serving to free the images themselves from past memory or any semblance of immediacy. This allows the images to act as stand alone objects. The larger than life size of the prints removes the images from the everyday mundane experience of the objects photographed. This creates a space to posit the work within the viewer’s own experience.



For my Love, Margaret Demonnier











































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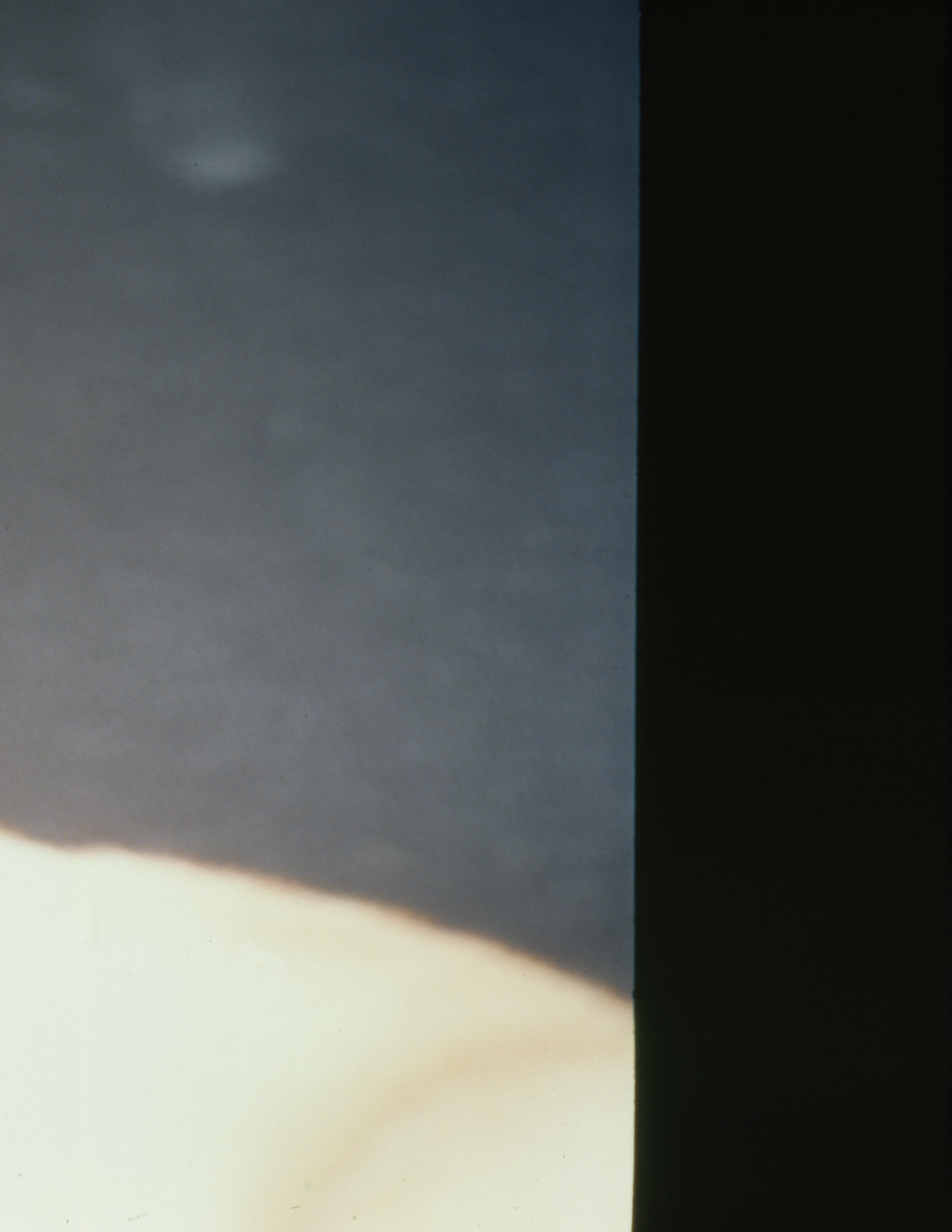


































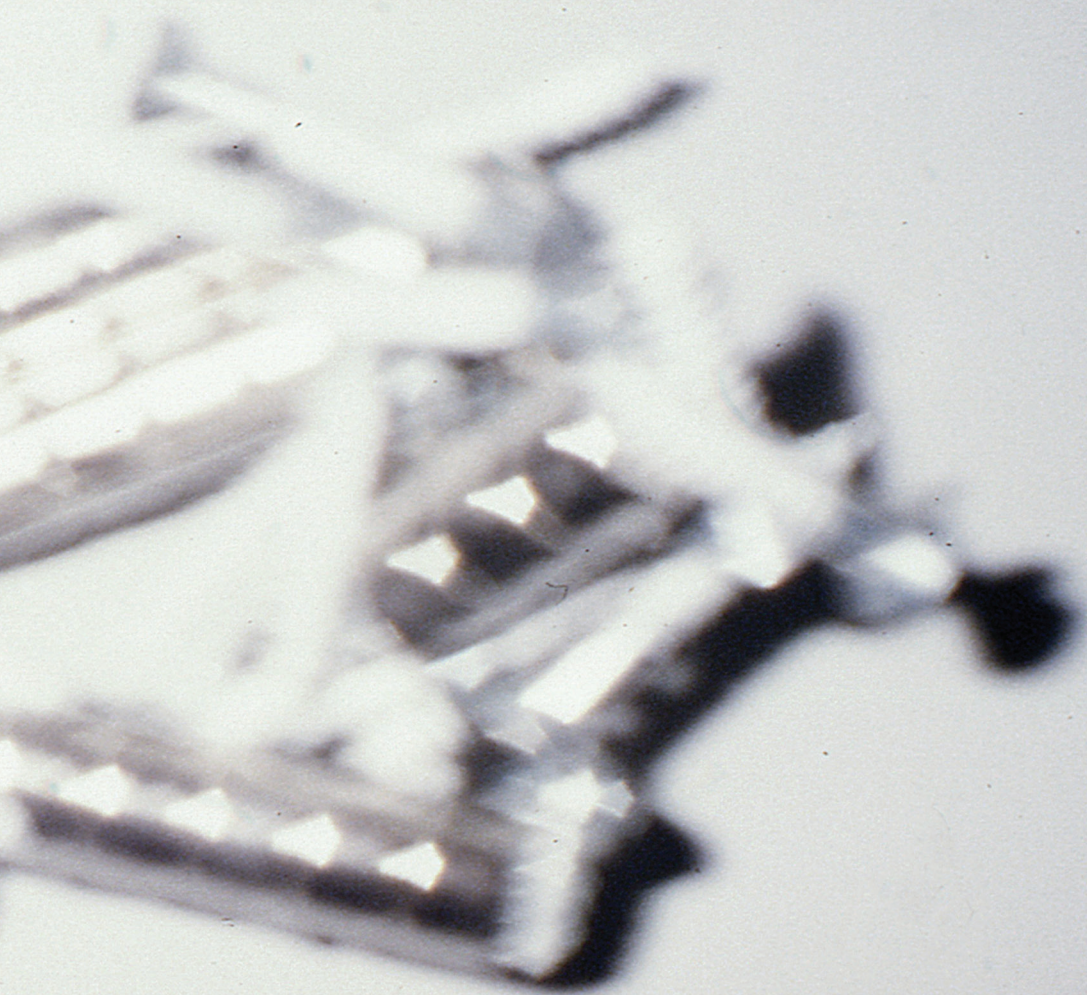


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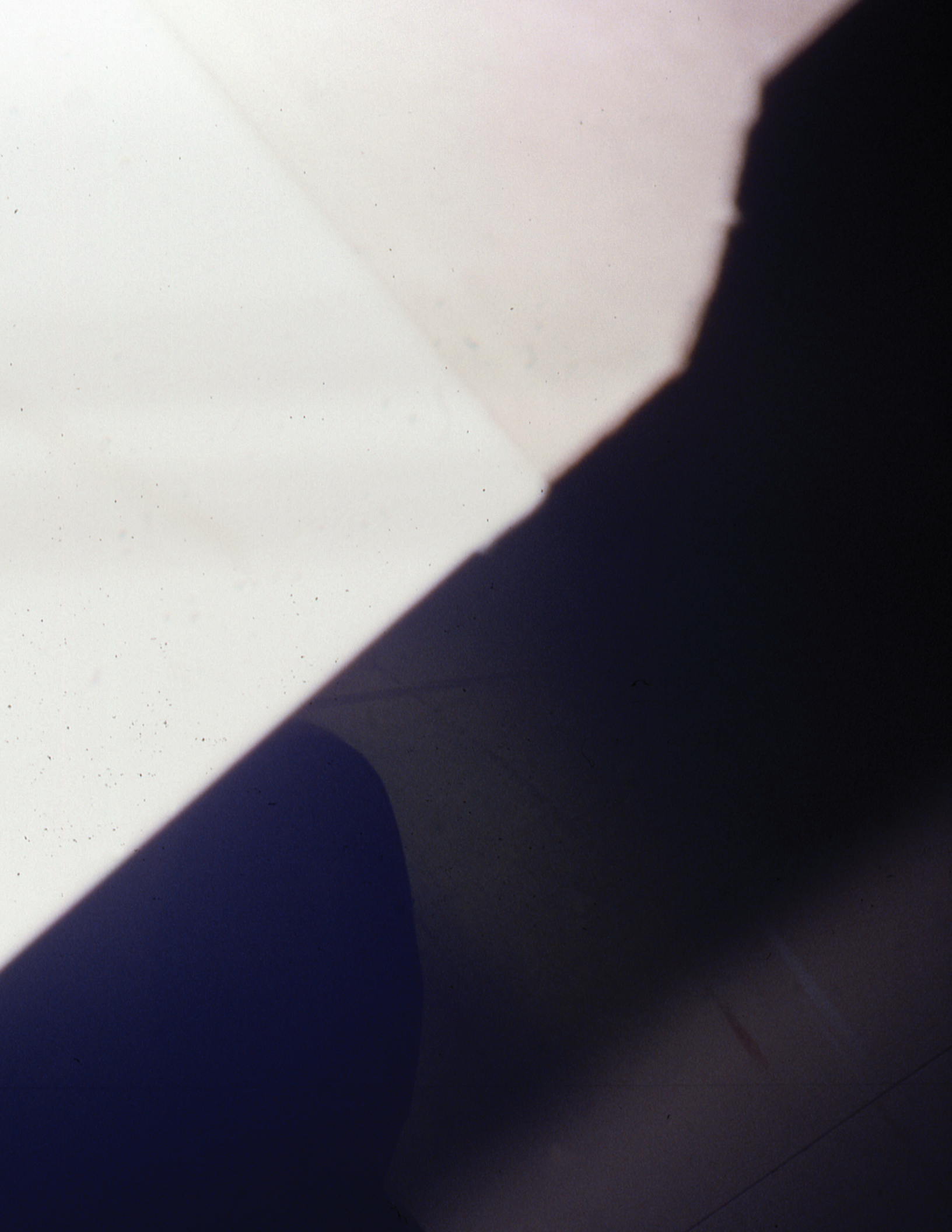




















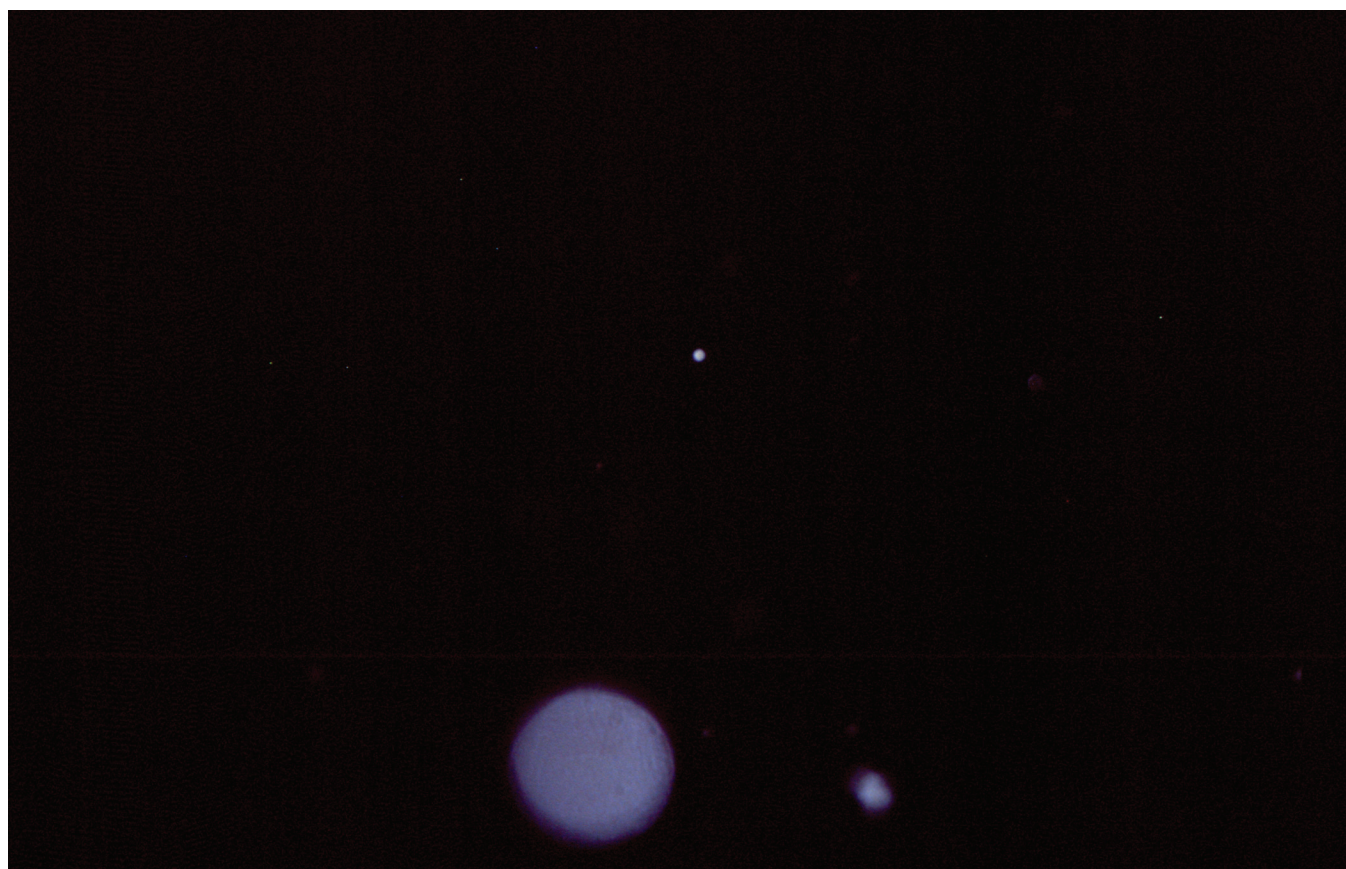






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Essay







## Impartial Validity

Impartial Validity is a project that explores the idea of expressing personal post-war trauma through the medium of photography. The work consists of images of banal subject matter, which act as triggers that take me back to my experiences in war.

Shot at close range with direct flash, the images represent a lack of realistic detail. The subject matter is obscured; the details of the images are washed out or blurred, which signals a language of abstraction, rather than of realism. The resulting images offer both a correlation and alternative to contemporary “star wars” technologies employed by the military, which proliferate the public sphere of the internet and news media. New technologies such as those associated with the apparatus of night vision goggles, turn the spectacle of war into a seductive yet distantly remote abstraction.

The title of the project holds a double meaning, much like the dualities that I embrace in my work such as the photographic and the painterly qualities of my images. On the one hand, the title reflects the impartiality and indifference I came to recognize in my photographs related to trauma. On the other hand, it reflects my impartiality to give proof and thus validating my personal trauma.

I was born in the United States to an American Mother and a Libyan Father. I grew up in Libya until I graduated high school and left my home to come back to United States. I decide to pursue my perception of the American dream, unaware of what that really meant at the time. Due to financial difficulties and with nowhere else to turn, I enlisted in the United States Marine Corps in December 2000. In 2003, I was deployed to Iraq as part of the American invasion. I was deployed a second time in 2004 to work as an Arabic translator. My job included taking part in raids and interrogations as well as being a rifleman. This experience put me in the front row in the collision of two cultures with which I identify, shaking my core being, forcing me to reevaluate all that I believed about humanity. After exiting the Marines, I pursued my education, meanwhile experiencing severe post-traumatic stress as a result. Working as a translator put me in position as mediator between the Americans and Iraqis. This act of mediation is carried through to my current work in which I develop, through a personal visual language, as a translation to the phenomenon of war and its traumatic aftermath

Contemporary trauma theorist Cathy Caruth states that “Trauma ... does not simply serve as a record of



the past, but precisely registers the force of an experience that is not yet fully owned.”<sup>1</sup> What she means by not yet fully owned is that the traumatic experience is not assimilated and is not fully integrated in the conscience of the person who lives through the traumatic experience. In other words, the trauma is not fully experienced. This “un-experience-able”<sup>2</sup> effect is a defense mechanism the mind enacts by delaying the effects of the traumatic event as a form of self-preservation. This delayed reaction, causes disconnect from the memories original context which the mind blocks again; thus causing a repetitive cycle in which the person relives the experience, sometimes in the form of flashbacks or nightmares. This is what Sigmund Freud calls the “compulsion to repeat.”<sup>3</sup> Freud believed that this is caused by the *Thanatos* or the death-instinct over riding the *Eros* and the pleasure principle.

When I started what finally became *Impartial Validity*, I used black and white traditional methods because I felt the presence of the film was paramount to capturing the trace of the experience of the encounter I had with my triggers. Through the placement of banal objects in the center of the frame, without regard to aesthetics, or preconceptions, I had hoped that the emotions I experienced, transferred over to the print, and consequently to the viewer. Failing to achieve this, I commenced scratching and eventually burning the negative to bring the sense of aggressive intensity to the images. This was still an inadequate gesture.

My thinking process at the time relied heavily on the concept of the image as a trace of the real or as evidence as posed by Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida* in which he states, “From a phenomenological viewpoint, in the photograph, the power of authentication exceeds the power of representation.”<sup>4</sup>

Barthes purported the photograph is tied with its referent; the photograph essentially becomes invisible and the only thing visible is its index indicating, “that-has-been.”<sup>5</sup> This is the essence of photography or what he calls the “*noeme*.”<sup>6</sup> Thus the photograph functions as a reference for the real. In my case it was a reference to the encounter with my triggers, which in turn reference internal feelings related to my personal trauma.

Like Barthes, I concluded that the photographs I made at this time foregrounds the unconscious while simultaneously representing it. Thus, I treated the photograph as a portal to a true self-identity, which I believed

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1 Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 151.

2 Jessica Catherine Lieberman, “Traumatic Images,” *Photographies*, (2012): 95, accessed April 28, 2013, DOI: 10.1080/17540760701788283.

3 Sigmund Freud, and Benjamin Nelson. *On Creativity and the Unconscious: The Psychology of Art, Literature, Love, and Religion* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009), 145.

4 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflection on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 89.

5 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 80.

6 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 80.



was shattered by my experiences in the Iraq war. This was the model I originally followed to authenticate my experience of war to an audience that has little first hand knowledge of war, except through the consummation of mediated sources. It was my hope to present a raw and authentic representation of post war trauma.

Early on in my project, I also began incorporating Color Polaroids. The addition of color was to add a layer of meaning and expression that I felt was missing in the black and white photographs. Yet my dissatisfaction with this method persisted. The images were static and cold.

Also, I felt the preciousness of the image distracted from the message that I was trying to communicate. Therefore I resorted to bashing the originals with a sledgehammer in an attempt to bring a manifestation of the aggressiveness of war. This making-and-destroying process developed a method that became essential to my work method.

Reflecting upon the destroyed Polaroids, I realized the images I was trying to destroy were essentially invincible. What I assumed to be destructive in fact was transformative. The visual art theorist W.T.J. Mitchell states in his book *Cloning Terror* that the image can never be destroyed; it is only transformed into a new state and the image persists.<sup>7</sup>

In another attempt at expressing my ideas about destruction and transformation, I cut out geometrical shapes out of the negative using an *Exacto* knife. In an image I took while on a trip to New York City, I cut out the main object in the frame, a fountain; its reflection is still visible in the water. What remained was the black form reflecting the great emptiness I felt lying behind these images. This also reflected that something was missing.

This and the previous methods seemed more wrapped up in a personal critique of photography than a method of expressing an emotional truth that I was longing for. However, I do not dismiss them as fruitless or poor methods of representation, they simply did not satisfy my need for a more authentic mode of expression of what mattered to me most at the time; the trauma of experiencing war first-hand.

I eventually abandoned the medium format and instant film and turned instead to using a point and shoot 35mm camera for two reasons: one because it allowed me greater mobility to make more images, and two, because I did not want to endow the images with any sense of preciousness. The first reason was practical, the second marked my new conceptual approach to my project by becoming weary of the photographic record aspect of the work up to this point.

Consequently, I used slide film, which I continued to use when making the current thesis work, because

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<sup>7</sup> W.T.J. Mitchell, *Cloning Terror: The War of Images, 9/11 to the Present* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 27.



when coupled with the cheap optics of my camera. The resulting images displayed a soft focus and grainy look that diminished the classic aspect of the image greatly in favor of a *de-skilled* look yet at the same time retaining the vivid colors that is an important part of my final body of work as exemplified by this image.

It was also at this time that I began to notice the similar aspects in the way I photographed with the shared aspects between the camera and the rifle. This became a conscious part of my work. This conceptual shift was more than a simple rhetorical game. Instead of working intuitively as I always did in the past, acting out a game of the hunt gave me a simulated purpose.

However, despite these new realizations, I still photographed the same objects, the same way and I still felt the same old repulsion towards the final product. I finally understood that equating banal objects to the horror of war through the indexical quality of the photograph repulsed me.

For example, what commonplace object in a photograph is capable of relating the way I felt watching a ten year old boy bleeding to death on an operating table from a gash in his head caused by a blast from an unexploded ordinance? I spoke to him in Arabic telling him to be brave and be still while the Navy doctor struggled to stitch the wound shut. This experience, like many other horrors I experienced at war, in no way could be represented by the banal objects. I had to re-evaluate my approach to photography and representation so I could come closer to giving a more complex reflection of the experience. The result of this realization led to the final thesis images, for the Impartial Validity, exhibit and publication.

The images in this publication more closely references the concept of traumatic experience, since instead of the viewers focusing on the object portrayed, their gaze is now focused on the photograph itself, which stands naked due to the blur. The viewer is left suspended in a state of incomprehension and curiosity.

The photographs then either pose a question for the viewer or convey an unexplained sensation, which the viewer must interpret. They are free to create whatever narrative is available within the context of the parameters, set by both their understanding of war or lack thereof.

In the red streak image, the color red conjures up either blood shooting from a wound splashing across a metallic surface or even simply an evening sky. The spark-like jets of light animate the red streak spilling from dark into light and it animates the image as a whole. This image does not correspond to the incident involving the bleeding boy; it encompasses what I remember of that night and everything up to this very moment. The appeal of this photograph, as with all the images in Impartial Validity, is that it defies a reductive reading of the image. It also denies the viewer engagement as a voyeur to my experiences in war.

Photographer and theorist Allan Sekula “The photograph is an ‘incomplete’ utterance, a message that



depends on some external matrix of conditions and presuppositions for its readability.”<sup>8</sup> argues that a photograph does not hold an intrinsic truth. It is an empty sign that waits to be filled with meaning. The reading of a photograph is heavily embedded in a cultural context that cannot be divorced from it. Therefore, Photographic reading is learned through a discourse that he defines as an arena of information exchange. Sekula helped me shift my thinking away from the theory of the indexical, offered through *Camera Lucida* by Barthes.

An important artist that I continue to return to as a source of inspiration and a source of confidence for my own art is the work of abstract expressionist painter, Mark Rothko. His reductive practice of eliminating hard lines and figures, to rely instead on pure pictorial elements such as color and scale, embodies his method to transcend reality. In a manifesto Rothko helped write, he states: “We favor the simple expression of the complex thought. We are for the shape because it has the impact of the unequivocal. We wish to reassert the picture plane. We are for flat forms because they destroy illusion and reveal truth.”<sup>9</sup>

It is this belief in the stripping away of referentiality that he transcends from the immediacy of painting to the high philosophical truths about the nature of existence.

Following in a similar method by eliminating the immediate recognizable referent, the images in *Impartial Validity* are opened up to transcend the immediacy of the photograph to the larger questions regarding trauma and its representation.

Through a series of engaging installations, Chilean Artist Alfredo Jaar articulates an oblique yet thoughtful approach to the subject of war and its aftermath in Rwanda. In his installation titled *Real Pictures*, Jaar entombed sixty images of the genocide in black linen boxes. On the outside of the boxes a description of the image inside is written in white. In the style akin to neo-minimalism, he placed the boxes in a grid and shined a light on them amidst a darkened gallery creating a somber and tense atmosphere. Jaar describes this piece as “a cemetery of images.”<sup>10</sup> This installation is among several that the artist created over six years to better represent issues of war and genocide, a concept that is essentially un-representable. The installation addresses Jaar’s personal angst with the ineffectiveness of a direct photographic indexicality as a stand-in for seeing thirty thousand bodies floating in a river in Rwanda.

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8 Allan Sekula, *Photography Against the Grain, On the Invention of Photographic Meaning* (The Press of NSCAD, 1984), 4.

9 Mark Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb, “*Mark Rothko: Towards Abstraction*,” National Gallery of Art, <http://www.nga.gov/feature/rothko/abstraction1.shtm> (accessed 13 April. 2013).

10 Abigail Foerstner, “*Africa’s Holocaust: Alfredo Jaar Creates A Photo Memorial To Rwanda*,” Chicago Tribune, 19 Feb. 1995, [http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1995-02-19/entertainment/9502190064\\_1\\_alfredo-jaar-real-pictures-rwanda](http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1995-02-19/entertainment/9502190064_1_alfredo-jaar-real-pictures-rwanda) (accessed 9 May 2003)



What Alfredo Jaar brought to my conscience is the immeasurable gap between an atrocity and the representation of it. I believe as he does, it is the artist's duty to try to close this gap the best he or she can between reality and the representation of it via the photograph. Concerning my work, the best way to do so is through the application of absurdity, which was a recurrent theme in my experience of war.

The World War One British trench poet, Wilfred Owen in his poem *Apologia Pro Poemate Meo* describes the state of absurdity in the chaos of war and the emotional numbness that is ensued:

Merry it was to laugh there –  
Where death becomes absurd and life absurder.  
For power was on us as we slashed bones bare  
Not to feel sickness or remorse of murder<sup>11</sup>

The elements of absurdity in my work include the pretense of the hunt for the un-representable image; the size of the prints in the exhibition part of the project are absurdly large in relation to the modest subjects depicted and above all, the space is absurdly reduced by shooting at close range.

The twentieth century continental philosopher Alberto Camus states in *The Myth of Sisyphus*: "Thus I draw from the absurd three consequences, which are my revolt, my freedom, and my passion. By the mere activity of consciousness I transform into a rule of life what was an invitation to death, and I refuse suicide."<sup>12</sup>

I relate to this quote by the mere activity of consciously transforming the act of photographing into a hunt. For Camus, at the heart of absurdity is coming to terms with the conflict between the tendency to find meaning in the cold indifferent physical world, which I equated with the cold indifferent photograph.

Frustrated with the popular media depiction of the war in Vietnam, Martha Rosler in her series titled *Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful* (1967-1972) collaged cut out magazine images of the Vietnam war and placed it with interior shots of American domestic spaces appropriated from *House Beautiful* magazine to create a clearly absurd image.

She revisited the same project thirty years later to produce a similar body of work in response to the Iraq

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11 Rolf P. Lessenich, "'Where Death Becomes Absurd and Life Absurder': Literary Views of the Great War 1914-1918" War Poetry, <http://webdoc.gwdg.de/edoc/ia/eese/artic99/less3/Sources/HTML-Pages/HTML-Pages/thegr68.htm#FN057> (accessed 22 April 2003).

12 Alberto Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus, and Other Essays*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage, 1961), 64.



war. In the piece titled *Gladiators*, we see images of American soldiers patrolling a living room while a picture from the *Abu Ghraib* prison abuse is hung on the wall. The gladiator wannabes are juxtaposed among soldiers and the destruction of the war in Iraq in the background while a college age man is being arrested in the living room. Rosler's montages attempt to connect between the far-away wars and the comfortable American living rooms.

In 1900, Sir John Herschel noting the similarities between the informal and quick way of shooting with the new Kodak Brownie to that of a hunting style coined the term *snapshot*. In hunting the term describes shooting really fast and without really aiming. This demonstrates that from early on in the history of photography the similarities between the act of photographing and hunting has been noted.

Susan Sontag in her book on Photography states: "*Just as the camera is a sublimation of the gun, to photograph someone is a sublimated murder- a soft murder, appropriate to a sad, frightened time.*"<sup>13</sup> Susan Sontag noted in her book on photography the intrusive nature of the camera, which is taking the place of the rifle, to capture and own the unattainable objects of desire. She satirically notes this when she relates the observation that hunters in Africa are trading their *Winchester* for a *Hasselblad*.<sup>14</sup> When I began consciously noting the similarity of metaphor between the camera and the rifle, it gave me a sense of control over my trauma, allowing room for further analysis and conceptualization of why and how I was going to depict trauma.

From my experience with a rifle as a Marine, the first thing one is taught is to never aim the rifle at anything you do not intend to shoot. They also teach to shoot to kill and not to wound for the sake of personal safety and the saving of ammunition. Also, an important principle in the art of marksmanship is the principle of sight alignment, sight picture, which is the practice of focusing the eye on the front sight post of the rifle and not the target making the target blurry and out of focus due to the shallow depth of field of the human eye. This ensures the rear and front sights are in line ensuring an accurate shot.

These are some of the aspects that correlate to some of the visual aspects in my work. For example, in this work, there are no images of people. All the images are shot at point blank range, which in marksmanship term means a guaranteed hit.

The blurring of the subject in my photographs mimics the blurring of the target as explained. My style of shooting which a lot of times involved walking the streets looking for an object to shoot, mimicking a patrol which is essentially a hunt, takes the concept of the snapshot to a level that is beyond the snapshot aesthetic of a Garry Winogrand or a Martin Parr photograph.

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13 Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 1990), 14-15.

14 Sontag, *On Photography*, 15.



Simulating the camera as rifle had a healing effect that I did not foresee at the beginning of the project. The process essentially mimicked the psychoanalytical healing method called *Talking Cure* in which a trauma of a patient passes through the stage of *Transference* from the original source of trauma to a new object of trauma. This is intended to disrupt the repetition-compulsion expanded upon earlier. Through this process, I am reliving the experience of war, transferring the object of the trauma that is beyond my reach, to the camera and the photograph, thus transferred back to a state of the pleasure principle. Embracing the camera as a rifle gave me control over the repetition of my trauma. It also makes the work closer to the authentic experience of the aftermath of the trauma related to war.

The blur aesthetic in my image serves two functions; as mentioned earlier, the blur in my images mimic the blur resulting from properly aiming a weapon. it also acts as enactment of the amnesia associated with trauma, therefore becoming more than a representation, this body of photographs are also the literal cause of my own amnesia. What I mean by this is, that in many cases, because of the blur I do not remember the objects I photographed. Thus the indexical quality of the photograph is disrupted and a distance is placed between the triggers of my trauma and myself.

In regard to amnesia and trauma. Amnesia does not necessarily mean a complete forgetfulness of the past or the trauma, but amnesia could be partial. Dr. Bessel A. van der Kolk, a researcher in the field of post-traumatic stress disorder wrote:

*Pathologies of memory are characteristic features of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). These range from amnesia for part, or all, of the traumatic events to frank dissociation, in which large realms of experience or aspects of one's identity are disowned. Such failures of recall can paradoxically coexist with the opposite: intruding memories and unbidden repetitive images of traumatic events.*<sup>15</sup>

The film titled *The Machinist*<sup>16</sup> directed by Brad Anderson can be seen as an example of amnesia and trauma as themes in visual art. In the film, the protagonist, suffering amnesia, is plagued with disturbing visions that reoccur through out the film, sometimes triggered by banal everyday objects such as the cigarette lighter in his car that has an air of dread and malice every time it pops. These triggers lead him back to face his traumatic experience.

I drew parallel lines between the anxiety the protagonist in the film had towards his objects of trauma and the anxiety I felt towards the objects I was photographing in my earlier work and which I later on abstracted.

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15 Bessel Van der Kolk et al. (1985), 191, quoted in Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 152.

16 *The Machinist*, dir. by Brad Anderson (2004; Filmax Entertainment).



However, unlike the protagonist in the film, I did not have a straightforward method to redeem myself. I had to free myself from my trauma by my own design through art and photography. Impartial Validity has given me that.

There is no turning back the tide of time to undo what has irrevocably been done. What I have however, is the belief in the ability to control my own destiny by owning up to my past and mediating the guilt associated with it. I transcend the trauma and the guilt by the deliberate abstraction of my images.

In the painting titled, *September*, by Gerhard Richter, we notice two vertical structures against a clear blue sky. The smearing of the paint across the canvas does not prevent that immediate revealing of the subject of the piece to anyone who is aware of the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. Richter's method of erasure is a successful attempt to represent an event that is un-representable, one that affected many people around the world. His abstraction prevented the piece from being a simple memorial and instead it became a piece that speaks to the atrocities of that event and the consequential atrocities related to it. The painting also functions as mediation to the tragic event versus being another method of painterly depiction.

Visually, I was also looking at the way new military technologies have changed the way we perceive and experience war. Take for example the thermal imaging systems fitted on helicopters, vehicles and directly on to rifles. This technology works by isolating and magnifying the heat signals produced by the human body making it visible in complete darkness, sometimes even through structures. The visualizing of the heat signal renders the human body into an abstraction of white figures silhouetted against a blackened earth. Videos of the recordings using this technology during combat engagement in Iraq and Afghanistan, found throughout the internet, are examples of aestheticizing and depersonalizing the act of killing through the use of new technology, while veiling the horror and atrocity of men killing men. This depersonalized mechanical look is rendered in my images as both the aesthetics of blur and blown-out detail to not only heighten the removed perspective of my post traumatic war experiences, but to offer a place of refuge within it.

For the installation part of my thesis work, I decided to print the images the largest possible size, pushing the film past its capability. This is in line with my original intention of using low quality material to amplify the de-skilling quality. Yet, this distortion, as it manifest in the pixilation due to scanning and enlarging, grounded the images in photography. Also the use of high gloss paper aided in this. This is important because it reinforces the capturing and rendering process. Placing the magnets used for hanging directly on the print was an act of my indifference to the precious quality of the print. Furthermore, the decision to hang with only two small magnets



left the print exposed to the elements. It placed them in a fragile and volatile state thus reflecting my physical and mental state during the war and therefore acting as another enactment of what makes up my personal trauma.

For the publication aspect of the work, I decided to print a vertical book with the majority of the images printed full bleed across the full spread. The images are impartial to the spine running across the middle of the book, resembling a wound that splits the images in two, yet it is the spine that holds the book together. These design choices along with the introduction of smaller images, further created a disruption to how the images are read.

In conclusion, the rifle gave me lethal power to save myself. It made the experience of war tolerable. The hardest time was after the return home, without my rifle, defenseless and naked in a society that seemed oblivious and indifferent to the atrocities of war enacted on their behalf. Impartial Validity took me from being a victim of my traumatic experiences and it gave me control over it. Even though the project seemed, even to myself at times, a dismissal of photography, it is in the end an affirmation of it because through the most basic elements of photography, I was given the tools to reenact the powerful experiences that became the visual element and representation of my post war trauma.











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